



God in the Flesh

VOLUME FIVE

Essays by Gene Shelburne

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



God in the Flesh

Senior Editor Gene Shelburne explained that since he only needs four or five Christmas columns per year, some of the essays in this Christmas issue were first put on paper as much as three years ago. Astute readers will pick up on subtle clues that the clock has been ticking while he has been writing.

Still, while the numbers on our calendars may have notched upward, the grand truths embodied in Christmas are timeless. They have stayed exactly the same.

We pray that the words in these pages will help you to focus with renewed joy on the grand truth that God of Heaven came down to this Earth because he loves us.

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Curtis Shelburne

“The **Word** became flesh and **dwelt** among **us**, full of **grace** and **truth**. We have beheld his **glory**, glory as of the only **Son...**”



John 1

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The Finder's Fee

After a repeat round of chemotherapy, a friend's wife lost all her hair. He decided to encourage her by joining her in the billiard-ball look.

Gaps in his gray hair had already appeared due to normal male balding. The front half of his scalp was shiny, and he had a significant bare circle in the back.

Instead of going to the fancy hair stylist he had been using for four decades, my friend decided to seek out a plain old barber. All he wanted was a super-close burr. A bare knob. The Yul Brynner or Kojak look. How much skill would that take?

With his usual good humor, he yanked the chain of this barber he had never met. "Since I'm already missing half my hair," he chuckled, "this burr-job should only cost me half price. Right?"

On this rare occasion my friend met his match.

"Yes," replied the man with the shears, "I'll only charge you half for the hair I cut off." Then he explained, "The other half will be my hair-finder's fee for what little hair you have left."

When you stop and think about it, this amusing tale embodies profound truth about a lot more than hair.


The barber's witty reply was worth the price of the haircut. But

my friend really wasn't on the cheap. He was more than willing to pay for his new bald look. But he was willing to pay more than that. He was willing to become a skinhead to send a message of love to his dear lady, to tell her, "Now we are alike."

That's what Jesus did. For you. For me. To give us hope, to wrap us in love, to connect with our hearts, to show us the way, our Lord gave up far more than hair.

Because he was God's equal, he rightly basked in the Glory of heaven. And he gave up all of that. "He emptied himself," the Scriptures tell us. Not because he had to. Because he loved us, even more than my now-hairless friend loves his wife.

Jesus became just like us "in every respect," the Bible insists. He wasn't just play acting or pretending. He laid aside his heavenly nature in all its glory and became completely human so we could know that he fully understands us and sympathizes with us when we hurt or fail.

As Christmastime approaches again this year, let's be wise enough to look beyond the twinkling lights and the sparkling trees and focus instead on that Baby in the manger, that "infinite infant." God who became a man. 

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Right When We Need It

I love the way Jeannette Clift George began her Christmas letter a couple of years ago.

"Just when we need it the most," she wrote, "here comes Christmas: God's telegram of love tucked away in a manger."

She hadn't yet seen the gruesome videos of ISIS jihadists beheading innocent journalists, but I'm sure that the months before she wrote those words were marred by equally disturbing atrocities.

Her Christmas letter pre-dated the latest wildfires in California or the fiery lava flows in Iceland or the lost airliner from Malaysia, but the days right before she sat down to write that letter no doubt contained enough dreadful calamities to warrant her opening words, "Just when we need it the most . . ."

Our days on this earth seldom are free from heartache and anxiety. As Moses wrote, "Their span is but trouble and sorrow" (Psalm 90:10). As Koheleth moaned, life for many of us is nothing but "pain and grief from dawn to dusk" (Ecclesiastes 2:23, *The Message*).


But some years hit us harder than others, don't they? When we have struggled through the anguish of losing a mate, burying a child, plowing under a crop, or going

broke, our souls are hungry to hear angels singing "Joy to the World."

"Just when we need it the most"—whether we shudder because of headlines about Ebola or because of text messages about a grandchild's addictions, all of us face moments when we desperately need to hear Heaven promising "peace on earth, goodwill toward men."

"Just when we need it the most"—maybe we're not distressed or depressed. Maybe this year we're just bored. Life has somehow lost its luster. Nothing seems to tickle our fancy or light our fires. But what if we saw that star in the sky? What if we heard the cries of the Baby in that manger? Would that wake us up again and recharge the batteries of our souls?

The Bible tell us that "at just the right time God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4). God's timing is always right.

This year when the bells begin to chime, when the carols begin to play, when the tree lights start blinking and the sounds of Christmas are in the air, all of this may be God's way of reminding us of his unlimited love. Here comes Christmas "just when we need it the most." 

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A Message of Joy

In the fields of Bethlehem that famous night, the shepherds heard an angel announcing, “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.”

How joyful is Christmastime for you?

Most of the Christmas carols that have survived for generations echo the upbeat joy the Bethlehem angel announced.

Years ago in *Christianity Today* Richard Leighton Greene noted that the carols from medieval and Renaissance times “belong to two worlds; they were written in days when one could be pious and merry at the same time.” I like that.

I hope we are learning again to combine the two. If we are, though—if we combine a proper mix of devotion and delight, I can promise you that some proper folks won’t like it.

You may recall that some of the sharpest barbs hurled at Jesus came from straight-laced religious leaders who thought he partied too much and with the wrong people. They thought he had too much fun.

In one of his newspaper columns, my little brother Curtis aptly described this wrong-headed

brand of Christianity. He said, “You might occasionally run across someone who is toxically religious and afraid of experiencing too much joy. But,” he went on to assure his readers, “our God has never been afraid of genuine joy. He is the Source of it.”

Christmas is a time when the Lord gives us joy in abundance.

I have always been fascinated by Paul’s description of the conversion experience of his friends in Thessalonica. “You welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit,” he wrote to them. And this seems to have pleased the apostle no end.


Do Paul’s words describe you?

Did becoming a Christian make you happier or harsher?

Did learning about Christ cause you to smile more or to frown more?

When you learn new Bible truths, does this make you easier to be around, or harder?

Do you enjoy life more because you know Jesus?

The Christmas story—the Luke 2 account—tells us that when Jesus comes into the world, or into our hearts, he is supposed to bring us joy. 

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Foxholes and Beds

Christmas in 1944 was an unforgettable time for some of us, but not because of its joy.

That December was just one of seven months that seemed endless to me—months when I was bedfast with rheumatic fever. I didn’t see our Christmas tree that year. It was in the living room. I was confined to my bed.

War rationing of gasoline coupled with the 35 mph wartime speed limit and with my sickness kept us from visiting the West Texas grandparents and cousins, as we always had done during the holidays. We were stuck in Corpus Christi that Christmas.

I remember the packages both grandmothers mailed to us that year—big boxes packed with lots of tiny boxes, presents from all the relatives we were missing so sorely. “Do Not Open Until Christmas” Grandmother Key had inscribed on each of the smaller gifts.

Half the kid presents were cap guns. By today’s PC rules we would have landed in jail by New Year’s Day.

Back in those pre-television days, my only entertainment there in my second-hand hospital bed was a cheap plastic radio. As Santa Claus’ annual visit drew near, I lay in that bed and listened to H. V. Kaltenborn describing the battles raging in South Pacific jungles and


across the European front.

My five-year-old grasp of the grave dangers facing our soldiers kept me from calculating just how much better my confinement was than their foxholes.

Over on the North Carolina coast my uncle spent that Christmas washing out blood and patching machine gun holes in the gun turrets of B-25s flown straight from England after bombing raids over Germany. 1944 was not his best Christmas.

My holiday memories of that long-ago year are skimpy, at least in part because my sickness isolated me from the part of the house where our family’s modest Christmas was happening.

But I do remember one Sunday afternoon shortly before Christmas Day. A dear family friend, an unmarried lady named Lucille, stopped by our home along with several of her buddies. She brought a gift just for me—a child’s book colorfully printed on large, thick cardboard pages. It’s the only specific gift I recall from that year.

Seven decades later that lone memory makes me wonder. This year what kindness am I showing to someone that will make this Christmas unforgettable for them long after I’m gone? 

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“Softly, Christmas”

Several years ago at Christmas time I clipped out a poem by this title from the weekly bulletin of a country church in Indiana.

Every December I find it atop my growing pile of Christmas sermons, and I treasure it more each time I recite it.

A woman named Margaret Bundy Moss wrote this poem, but it must not have been widely published. Even Google came up blank when I entered the title.

This unpretentious Christmas piece gives us four simple admonitions:

*Walk softly
As you go through Christmas,
That each step may bring you
Down the starlit path
To the manger bed.*

*Talk quietly
As you speak of Christmas,
That you shall not drown out
The glorious song of angels
With idle talk and merriment.*

*Kneel reverently
As you pause for Christmas,
That you may feel again
The spirit of the Nativity
Rekindled in your soul.*

*Rise eagerly
After you have trod
The Christmas path,
That you may serve more fully
The One whose birth we hail.*

I hope that this year the Christmas season turns out to be for you a blessed time full of love and joy.

When all the relatives are headed home and the decorations are being consigned to the attic for another year, the last lines of Moss' fine little piece may seem to be especially pertinent.

Hopefully, we will have spent a glorious season contemplating the ultimate truth that the God who made us chose to become human just like us. Holding that truth in our hearts should change every word we speak, every step we take, every deed we perform in the days ahead. *CA*



Curtis Shelburne

God in the Flesh

Going Home

What place do you call home? Is “home” where you were born? Where you grew up? Does “home” mean where your parents live? Or where your spouse and kids reside today?

While you were growing up, did your family migrate so often that you don't identify any of your roosting spots as home? More than any American generation before it, this one does tend to be home-less.

Years ago in one of his fine weekly columns, my colleague Bert Mercer addressed this topic.

“Someone has observed, ‘Home is here the heart is.’ Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his own epitaph on the theme of home: ‘Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the hunter, home from the hill.’

“Ring Lardner said with a certain defeated humor: ‘Home is where you can have more soup.’ Robert Frost observed wryly, ‘Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.’”

Bert mused that this last quotation from “The Death of the Hired Man” implies that far too many people in this world are not welcome anywhere. That's sad.

It seems inevitable that during holiday seasons our thoughts turn toward home.

How fortunate is the person

whose first thought of Christmas awakens instant memories of fun times with loving siblings and parents stringing Christmas lights or opening gifts. In his famous carol Bing Crosby acknowledged that “I'll be home for Christmas” cannot come true for many of us physically, but those who are happy do tend to go there in their dreams.

How blessed are those whose mental images of Thanksgiving include dining tables surrounded by family and friends they love most! Ideally, “Christmas” and “home” are inseparable terms.

Few scenes embody loneliness more bleakly than a traveler snowed in at an airport. Surrounded by strangers. Hundreds of miles from home. On a special holiday.

Few scenes embody happiness more tangibly than a dining table loaded with turkey and all the holiday trimmings. A table surrounded by family members who delight in sharing both the bird and the banter during that storybook hour. Or a tree surrounded by loved ones opening gifts.

Now back off. Take stock. Realize that far more vital to your happiness than any of the holiday trappings in those scenes are the people. Give God thanks for all these dear souls who bless you beyond measure. *CA*

God in the Flesh

Christmas in September

Writing Christmas columns in September is one of my hardest tasks.

Normally I send my columns to the papers about a month early. They get my December pieces during the first week of November. This means I have to jingle the bells and hang the holly no later than mid-October.

In my first fall as a weekly columnist (over a quarter of a century ago), I sweat blood to conjure up Christmas spirit during Indian summer.

Never again, I told myself. So during that December I penned Christmas columns and filed them for the year to come. While the carols were playing and the lights were twinkling and Mary and Joseph were getting pulpit time, I wrote Yuletide columns a year in advance.

For twenty-five years this strategy worked. Except for a few awkward moments (such as references to snowdrifts in a dry winter), few of my readers felt the time-lag. And the columns I produced did radiate genuine Christmas spirit instead of hypocrite cheer manufactured during a September heat wave.

This approach worked until a couple of years ago.

During the previous December, right when I should have been writing the next year's Christmas

copy, I suffered a totally unexpected stroke.

In earlier columns I have told you how blessed I am to have suffered so little damage from that stroke. It could have been much worse. But it did shut down my writing right when I should have been reflecting on "Joy to the World" a year early.

In the waning days of September I now sit in the bright sunshine contemplating a majestic vista in the Canadian Rockies. The grand view thrills my soul. It's heavenly. The brilliant gold of the poplar leaves outshines the lights of any Christmas scene, and the thousands of spruce and fir trees on the lower mountain slopes make all the Christmas trees in Texas look skimpy.

Here I am, at least a thousand miles closer than I usually am to Santa's front door. I need to write something Christmasy. But the mountain sheep we scattered yesterday didn't resemble reindeer, and I haven't spotted any loose elves.

As you read these words, Christmas probably will be closing in fast. Only a few weeks away. But, as I pen this column, somehow on this unseasonably warm autumn morning Bethlehem seems a million miles away. *CA*

God in the Flesh

I'm Puzzled

That night my local grandkids and I hunched over a devilish jigsaw puzzle until way into the wee hours.

This kind of self-abuse is one of our family's Yuletide rituals. The grandkids delight in giving me puzzles that border on impossible. Then on a cold December night each year one of them invariably recalls that atrocious gift. Gleefully, they break it out and for the next few nights we moan and groan and upbraid the giver for afflicting us with such an ordeal.

It's great fun. Because we're doing it together.

That year granddaughter Jillian was the culprit. On Father's Day, with monkeys dancing in her eyes, she presented me the annual puzzle. It was the historic photo of eight or nine iron workers sitting on an open steel girder eating lunch atop the unfinished Empire State Building.

Behind the smiling workers lies Manhattan in the late 1940s. Acres of World War II vintage buildings comprise the backdrop for the photo, all of them looking enough alike to make the puzzle pieces virtually indistinguishable from each other.

Adding to the difficulty of the jigsaw assembly process, metropolitan smog blurs the details of the buildings in the more distant background.

That night the grandkids poured out that box of puzzle pieces shortly after a late supper (which was another of our family's holiday traditions—my late mother-in-law's unique potato soup).

Well after 2 a.m., with my eyes burning and my neck muscles howling, I staggered off to bed. Only one of the grandkids was dumb enough to stick with me that late in the night, and he nodded off several times while we sat ogling the sea of look-alike puzzle pieces.

As I predicted, we put in at least two more marathon jigsaw sessions before the last piece fell into place. Then, following our usual routine, we gazed at our finished product briefly with a sense of satisfaction, and then in three minutes or less we cleared the table. We tore up all those hours of labor and scraped the loose pieces into the box, never to look at them again.

Senseless? you may ask. Obviously. A waste of time? Without doubt.

But that's what holidays are for, isn't it? We treasure such times precisely because, for a few brief hours, we get to do something that doesn't matter.

What does matter immensely is that we spend those precious hours with the people we love most. Any excuse to do that is holy. *CA*

God in the Flesh

“I’ll Be Home . . .”

It seems almost like yesterday, but half a century ago Christmas was a time when we huddled around our own scrawny Christmas tree with our three goslings. But for us that was a tiny, almost trivial part of the season.

Year after year our main Christmas activities were structured so that our little family could spend quality time either with my wife’s extended family or with mine—or with both.

I still remember the eighteen-hour non-stop drives from Abilene, Texas, to Phoenix, Arizona. In a ’52 Chevy coup. At 55 mph in the pre-Interstate-highway days.

But it was worth it, just so we could soak up a few precious hours with the grandparents and cousins and a host of other kin who clustered for the season.

Now we’re the grandparents. In this far more complicated phase of our lives, we hunker down at home and thank the Lord if any of our widely scattered clan can wangle a day or two to be with us during the holidays.


“I’ll be home for Christmas” had one meaning when Bing Crosby crooned those immortal words during war-time more than seventy years ago. Now they express what often seems like an impossible dream for a generation scattered coast to coast and even on multiple continents.

My lady and I used to worry about how to include both her family and mine in our Yuletide plans. Now that our kids have in-laws and some of our grandchildren do too, the Christmas visiting equation defies solution.

As I write these words, I’m painfully aware that some of my close friends will be celebrating their first Christmas without a parent or a sibling or a mate. When I think of them, my concern about loved ones stuck several states away begins to sound almost petty in comparison.

Did you ever stop to wonder how Mary’s parents felt about their very pregnant daughter being so many miles away in Bethlehem on that first Christmas night?

Luke tells us in his Gospel that, soon after Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt to save their child. If they somehow managed to let their kinfolks know where they were, how do you think that news would have impacted the hearts of Joseph’s clan?

If you’re part of a tribe that cherishes family time together, do you realize how blessed you are? This Christmas get on your knees and thank the Lord not only for sending his Son to our planet but for also bringing your dearest loved ones to your door. 

God in the Flesh

What Christmas Says

A friend of mine attended his grandparents’ sixty-second wedding anniversary. They seemed so happy, he said. So full of robust health. He hardly got home when his mother called to tell him his grandfather had died.

Back in his family’s hometown, he stood beside his grandmother as she received a host of friends who had come to console her. “We understand,” several of them said as they shook her hand. “We know how you feel.”

About the tenth time somebody echoed that empty line, my friend’s grandmother drew herself up to her full indignant height and snorted, “You could not possibly know how I feel! I lived with that man over twice as long as you have been alive. Not more than a dozen nights in all those years did we sleep in a different bed. We began every morning together with coffee. We ended every day together in prayer. Part of me is missing today. You could not possibly know how I feel.”

God made sure that you and I could never lodge that charge against him. The story of Christ’s birth assures us that God became man. “The Word became flesh” and shared fully in the human predicament. From the trauma of birth to the violence


of unjust death, God went through everything a human being can go through.

“He became like us in every respect,” the Scriptures assure us. “He suffered in every way that we do.” So he understands what we’re going through. That’s the message of Christmas.

Christmas assures us that the God we worship is no absentee landlord who lives in luxury a long way off while we struggle futilely to survive in a cruel world.

Christmas assures us that our God is not a Lawgiver lost somewhere on a heavenly cloud handing down rules to complicate a situation he knows nothing about—like some south Texas legislator making laws for the Texas panhandle he’s never even visited.

“Been there and done that,” is one of our hip phrases to assure somebody that we understand what they’re describing to us. It’s a good summary of God’s message to us in Christmas. To a world full of hurting, struggling humans, the God of heaven can point to Bethlehem and say, “Been there. Done that.”

That’s why Christmas is so important. Virtually everything we believe as Christians is based on the truth that God visited our world and became one of us. 

God in the Flesh

Getting Into the Mood

Christmas can be the hardest time of the year for some of us. If we have just buried a mate or a child, or if our safe and certain world has just fallen apart, December days can be anything but merry. At times like this, holiday grief recovery groups at a nearby hospice may bless us more than we expect.

Are you like me, though? As Santa Claus approaches, some years I just can't muster up the jolliness of old St. Nick, and I can't figure out why. The lights twinkle and the sleigh bells ring, but that year my heart does not respond.

During a recent December I conjured up a strategy to jumpstart the cheer of the season. Just in case.

My lady and I had jumped at an unexpected chance to spend half a week in an Angel Fire mountain cabin during the first days of December. It was still so early in the Yuletide season that the only people jingling bells were Walmart and Target and Salvation Army kettle keepers.

On the afternoon before we headed toward the piney woods, I replaced my car's usual assortment of gospel music CDs with some of my finest Christmas classics.


As we topped the first hills on Boys Ranch Road, I surprised Nita by pushing the button that suddenly

filled my hail-dented RAV4 with the rollicking strains of Mannheim Steamroller's signature rendition of "Deck the Halls." For the next four hours-plus as we tracked herd after herd of antelope trekking the mountain meadows, we were immersed in the glorious music of the season.

One golden oldie CD was half the keepsake set of traditional carols by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. A heart-thrilling contrast to their "big" sound was James Galway. His crystal-clear flute awakened Christmas carol memories I had lost in my past.

My brother Curtis' crooning on his fine Christmas CD was also a sound that blessed my soul. So were the almost forgotten harmonies on the Glad album I dredged up for that day's trip to the mountains.

Four more hours of that same marvelous music during our journey home produced the result I had hoped for. By the time we rolled back into the city limits, I was ready to start getting ready for Christmas.

"O Come Let Us Adore Him" had become more than words in a carol. "Joy to the World" now filled my soul. By the grand music of the season, God was imparting to my human heart the blessings of his Heaven. 

God in the Flesh

Naughty or Nice

I liked the Dennis the Menace comic strip that ran a couple of weeks before a Christmas not too long ago.

In the way only a pro like him could do it, Dennis was sharing his mature insights with a younger buddy.

"I'm trying to be nice," Dennis confided to the less experienced lad. With a pained look on his face, Dennis lamented, "You wouldn't believe how naughty comes back to haunt you at Christmastime."

Not just at Christmas, Dennis.

All of us who have a conscience harbor regrets because of foolish, senseless, or downright wicked deeds we have done. Some of us would give anything if we could erase words we blurted out, remake choices we lurched into, cancel life-ruining mistakes we now have to live with.


I don't remember who said it, but he was right: "Twenty seconds of stupidity can ruin a life." Living with the consequences of those mindless seconds can seem like an eternity. Our naughtiness keeps haunting us long after Santa Claus exits the scene.

When we sing the ditty about Santa Clause "makin' a list, checkin'

it twice, / Gonna find out who's naughty or nice," we're always joking, aren't we? Do you know any decent parents who withhold Christmas presents just because a son or daughter has misbehaved? I don't.

The God we serve is like our loving parents, only better. "He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities," the psalmist rejoiced (103:10). This is how we know how much God loves us, the apostle Paul reminds us. He died for us "while we were yet sinners"—when we least deserved it.

Any youngster who ever vowed to be good until Christmas found out the hard way how impossible it is to be angelic all the time. We humans just are not wired that way, are we? All of us can echo the apostle Paul when he said, "The good I want to do, I don't do. The bad I don't intend to do, I wind up doing."

So Dennis is right. Our naughty moments just keep coming back to haunt us. Because of the blood of his Son, God in his grace will cleanse us from every sin. He will forget them forever. But, as King David found out centuries ago, their consequences never go away. 

God in the Flesh

Seeing the Light

The lights of Christmas have always lit up my soul.

My family's first string of lights had twelve bulbs. In my four-year-old eyes, they blazed gloriously.

Who would have dreamed in those austere World War II days that the homes in middle-class suburbia all across our land would one day gleam with the glow of hundreds of sparkling lamps?

When my own kids were still young, we set aside at least one special night every December to drive through the showplace neighborhoods whose extravagant decorations were a dazzling delight. That was a high point in every Christmas season: "going to see the lights."

For some reason those same kids don't want me to climb the ladder anymore to put up our Christmas lights. So I stood and watched last year while my granddaughters and my son-in-law cleaned out our roof-gutters and adorned them with strands of low-wattage, high-tech lights.

My lady and I were in the mountains so we missed our town's best-ever Parade of Lights. In the videos we later watched on TV, we could see the downtown streets packed with excited citizens who braved the cold to see all the lights.

Ever since the glory of the Lord lit up the turf around those Bethlehem shepherds and that famous star alerted those ancient wisemen to the arrival of the King, we have linked the birth of our Lord with images of light.


When John set out to tell us how "the Word became flesh," he coaxed us to think of Jesus' coming in terms of lumens appearing. "He was the source of life," John wrote, "and that life was the light for humanity."

Why did Jesus come? Because an evil, ignorant world desperately needed his illumination. So John wrote, "The light shines in the dark, and the dark has never extinguished it."

Another John, the one we call the Baptizer, was sent by God to alert his neighbors that the light from heaven was coming. But the Baptizer "was not the light," the apostle with the same name explained. "He came to declare the truth about the light."

That light—"the real light which shines on everyone, was coming into the world," John said.

Years after his birth, Jesus would declare, "I am the light that has come into the world so that everyone who believes in me will not live in the dark" (John 12:46).

Do you see why we celebrate Christmas with lights? 

God in the Flesh

Not the Same

The changes in how we celebrate Christmas crept up on us. No warning. No chance to dodge the inevitable.

Christmas was so much easier—so much more fun—when we couldn't afford it. What a delight it was to slip out and purchase that one special gift that my lady would never have splurged on for herself!

When our kids (and even our grandkids) were toddlers or pre-school brats, we could bury our Christmas tree in wrapped-up trinkets and toys without losing any sleep worrying about what they would like, or need.

Not so today. Have you tried buying presents for successful, young adults in this high-tech age? How can you possibly know what they want, or need?

We still tingle to "Jingle Bells" (especially when Dan Hanson plays it). We delight in the holly and mistletoe. So nothing I write here is intended to say bah-humbug.

But if your house still overflows with family, both young and old, during this season, and if your table is too small to seat all the kids and kin at Christmas dinner, then you may not know yet what it feels like when that jolly crowd is missing. And it will be someday. Possibly sooner than you expect.

Last December, for the first time


since I was four, my fingers did not install a single Christmas decoration at our house. My loving clan made sure the old man stayed off the ladder. Not a bad idea probably, but I missed what had always been a big part of the "fun" of Christmas.

My fancy new RAV4 runs way better than the old, hail-dented one I passed on to a grandson. But somehow I let the dealer hand me its title and keys before I realized that it won't play a CD.

Since Christmas music is rationed on most radio stations anymore, I have endured my first Christmas sans Mannheim Steamroller or the Mormon Tabernacle choir. Christmas without carols hardly seems like Christmas.

Christmas seems to have more updates than Windows10. Its changes are like any other changes. They can be annoying. All of them take some getting used to.

But one thing about Christmas never changes: its focus on that Bethlehem baby, the Creator in a crib, the Lord of Heaven and Earth now a helpless infant, the Word become flesh.

As long as Christmas points us to that Savior—to Emmanuel (God with us), none of the changes really matter. Not so long as we can sing, "O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." 

God in the Flesh

The God-Man

Christmas traditions like Santa Claus and elves and reindeer and carrot-nosed snowmen, while loaded with fun, come across as almost mindlessly simple. So much so that one local dork who calls himself a Baptist pastor showed up in our mall last December to tell kids in the Santa Claus line that Santa doesn't really exist.

When this nut's antics made the six o'clock news, most of my Baptist friends cringed with embarrassment, and all of us who honor Jesus joined them in fervent hope that this deluded soul and his bah-humbug message would vanish quickly from our local headlines.

I have no idea what triggered that fellow's anti-Santa campaign. Could it be that he is a theological literalist who has no place in his own mental world for fairy tales and nursery rhymes and therefore cannot tolerate such unreality in the minds of little children?

If that poor man's mental make-up lacks the dimension where most adults store what we call fantasy, I feel sorry for him. With a psyche so crippled, he's probably also ill-equipped to grasp the subtle contrasts that for almost two millennia have fascinated great Christian teachers and thinkers when they ponder the truths of Christmas.

St. Augustine of Hippo, for example, captured some of the

Yuletide mystery in his famous description of the baby Jesus: "He was created of a mother whom He created. He was carried by hands that He formed. He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, He the Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute."

Centuries later the Christian poet Lucy Shaw captured more of the same cosmic ironies in a piece she called "Mary's Song":

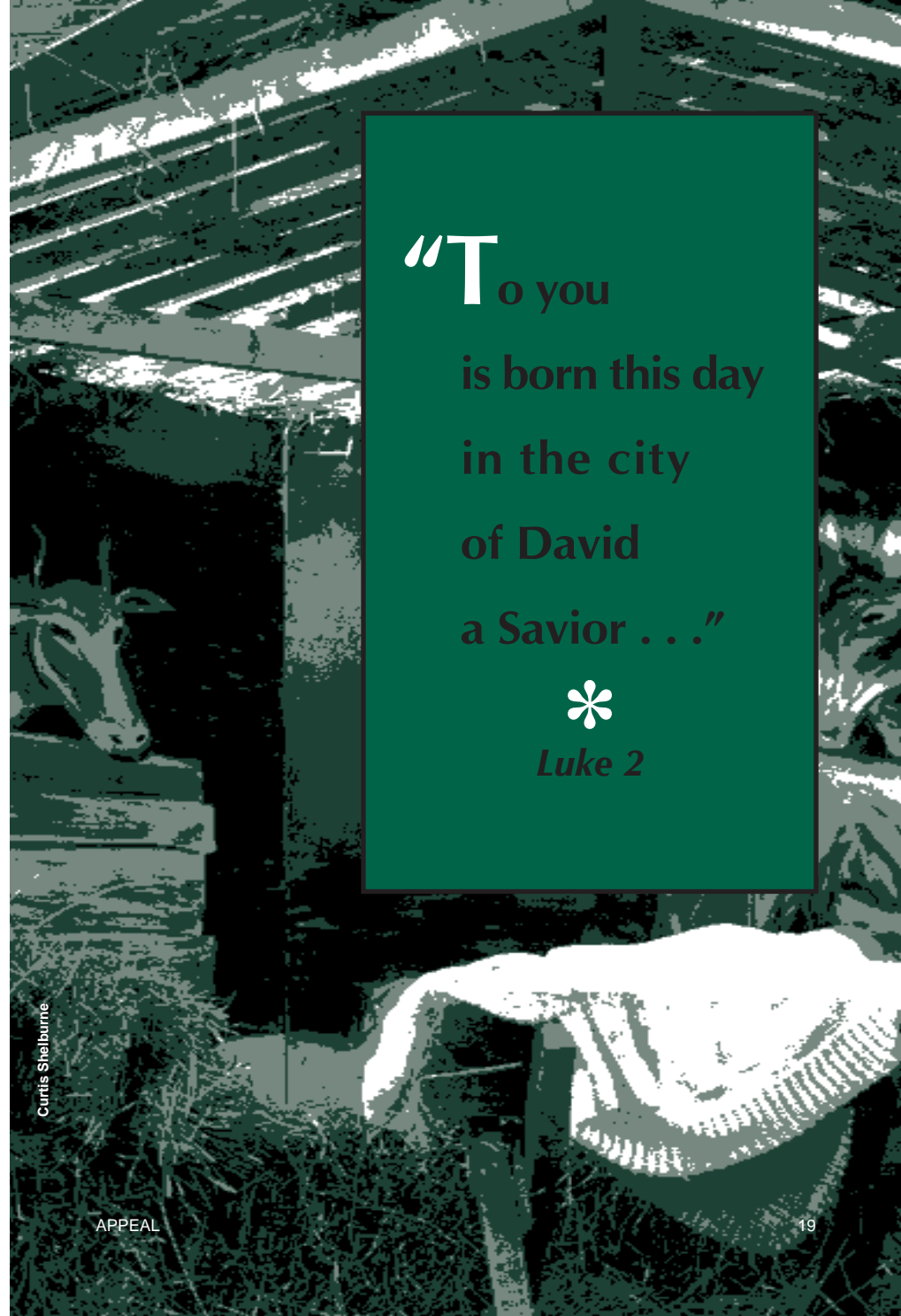
*Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed
who overflowed all skies,
all years.
Older than eternity, now he
is new.*

While these seeming contradictions fuel the faith and warm the hearts of those who bow before Jesus, they may cause skeptics to choke and chortle. The marvels of Christmas bless one and blind the other.

Thomas Aquinas probably didn't know he was writing about Christmas, but his words apply to Bethlehem:

"To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary.

"To one without faith, no explanation is possible."



**"To you
is born this day
in the city
of David
a Savior . . ."**



Luke 2

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